DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 681 CS 213 554

AUTHOR Murphy, Thomas P.
TITLE Making a Living, Making a Life: English and Business.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (23rd, Pittsburgh, PA, March 27-29, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College English; Employment Experience; *English Instruction; Higher Education; Interaction; Literature Appreciation; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS Professional Concerns

ABSTRACT

The question of whether the study of English is good preparation for business distracts attention from the more critical question of whether business is a good place to continue to study English. Three projects undertaken by a Ph.D. in Old and Middle English working for a freight railroad suggest that there are possibilities. As part of his job, he worked on a corporate history, read and studied in the field of labor dispute resolution, spent time on the railroad translating labor agreements into logical propositions and learning about how "natural language interfaces" worked. The critical step was to realize that he was not simply considering the language of labor agreements, but that he was studying linguistics and how language works. In an effective classroom, students see how the interaction of experience and literature allows them to grow in their understanding of both literature and experience. The first step is for English teachers to drop their defensive posture and be clear about what they have to offer. The study of literature has always helped people understand the larger context. An experience with literature supplies students with experience in and models for understanding their actions in a context larger than themselves. English classes should be equipping students to make jobs fit what they see as valuable. The first step is to give them experience at seeing the power of context. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED351681

MAKING A LIVING, MAKING A LIFE: ENGLISH AND BUSINESS

by Thomas P. Murphy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Thomas P. Murphy

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS 213 534

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Thomas P. Murphy
English Department
Belknap Hall
Mansfield University
Mansfield, PA 16933
(717) 662-4385

(c) 1992 Thomas P. Murphy

MAKING A LIVING, MAKING A LIFE: ENGLISH AND BUSINESS

by Thomas P. Murphy

First let me talk about my brilliant career. I completed my PhD. at Ohio State University in 1975. My field was Old and Middle English. When I finished my degree, I could tell you how many shillings the Norwich Grocer's Guild spent on its play in 1563, but I did not know that in 1975 the U.S. was in the middle of a recession. I did manage to find a teaching job for a year, but after that I learned about the recession first-hand.

I then stumbled onto a job with a major railroad helping to rewrite and renegotiate their more than 200 labor agreements. Someone knowledgeable about railroad labor relations might argue that familiarity with the Middle Ages was the perfect background, but aside from summer jobs on the railroad, I had little real preparation for the work.

But I learned. They did not seem sure, at first, how to use me. Perhaps they expected me to check commas and subject-verb agreement problems. It did not take long for my strength to emerge--the ability to do something like verbal systems analysis. My dissertation had looked at the impact of medieval English social order on character development in drama. On the railroad, things were reversed. We were writing documents intended to change the railroad's social order. I became

CS213554

particularly good at explaining the budget implications of agreement change and explaining to payroll and other departments how the changes affected them.

I wrote a proposal to create a research and planning section. The proposal was accepted and I was made manager of the section. I learned to program computers in four languages, and we developed models to project workforce changes and return on investment. I went from not knowing there was a recession to projecting when there was going to be one. Not bad for someone who never had a business course.

After five years of rounding to the nearest million, I asked for a chance to get some "field" experience. I became a personnel manager, then manager of labor relations at the railroad's largest shop and then regional manger of labor relations for the largest operating region with offices in 4 cities and responsibility for labor matters involving about 9,000 unionized employees. Finally I became assistant to the vice-president and assistant director of planning. I left this position because I wanted to write and farm and teach and spend more time with my family.

In going through this catalog, I don't feel like I am bragging. I always felt as I worked in that business environment that I represented the humanist scholar in business, that anyone with my background in that same situation would have been, in one way or another, just as successful.

My experience is not unusual. Michael Unseem's *Liberal Education and the Corporation* looked at the track records of

liberal arts graduates in the corporate world. On the one hand, he discovered that there are significant differences in the horizontal distribution of business and liberal arts graduates. Business majors tend to end up in finance and accounting and the liberal arts people, in marketing and sales. However, ultimately there is little difference in vertical distribution; at the middle and senior management levels, liberal arts graduates do just as well as business and engineering graduates.

So am I suggesting that we market English courses and the English major as particularly good preparation for a career in business? No, I am not.

Before my 15 years in business, in all sincerity, I used the statement, "English courses improve your writing skills" to justify introduction-to-literature courses to students with little interest in literature. I assured them that reading well-written works and writing under the tutelage of an English teacher would be useful to them no matter what they do in life. The danger of this approach is fairly obvious, especially as Writing Across the Curriculum and similar programs gain momentum. If we equate the study of literature with increasing writing skills, as students discover that they can learn to improve their writing by writing in their own fields, they will conclude they do not "need" literature. In addition, studying a short story hardly prepares you to write a business letter. When we make those sorts of arguments we are stretching things and hurt our credibility.

You can make a more credible argument for the study of literature by pointing to the upsurge in "Humanities for Business Executives" programs. A good example is the program sponsored by the American Management Association and Brandeis University. One recent program involved a three-day seminar that focussed on ethical decision making. During that time executives and faculty discussed such works as *The Death of Ivan Illich*, *The Secret Sharer*, *Night Flight*, and *King Lear*. The weekend costs about $2,000. There are many other such programs. As you might expect, Melville is very popular because of *Billy Budd* and one of my labor-relations favorites, "Bartleby the Scrivner."

A problem with using these courses as a model for approaching students is that they assume that the usefulness of the study of literature in the business organization confers validity on the literature. These programs are designed to sell the study of literature to the skeptical but experienced business person who already has some understanding of how to be successful in the business environment. For many students, "business" just means making money. The complexity of the world of business and executive decision making is as yet no more real than the world of a 19th-century New England whaling ship. Beyond that, I think it is wrong to use a business context to validate humanistic study. The subordination seems inappropriate.

That sentiment--that the knowledge of literature has value that transcends the world of getting and spending--sounds wonderfully noble. But when it comes to dealing with English

majors, many of us feel a bit squeamish about encouraging impressionable undergraduates to major in English, especially those students whom we feel are not graduate school material and for whom we see few job prospects.

I want to suggest that the question of whether the study of English is good preparation for business is a red herring that distracts us from the more critical question and that question is whether business is a good place to continue to study English.

My experience suggests that there are possibilities. Please remember that I did not work in the publishing business, or in an entertainment industry, or an educational institution or any other obvious kind of business in which English majors can ply the trade of literature. I worked on a freight railroad. I also did not work in the public relations department. I will admit that I did design and teach some writing courses and that I reviewed computer assisted writing courses for the department. I don't count these because my peculiar qualifications allowed me to steal them from the training department where they belonged. Three projects in particular do illustrate what I mean.

I was in railroad labor relations at a crucial and exciting time in a company that has been a leader in labor-management cooperation in a contentious industry. Part of my job was to chronicle and analyze how we had done it. I was to write a history of labor relations in our company. This project involved research in books and files, and at some points I felt like I was back looking through guild records. It also involved

interviewing participants, an exercise I found instructive and helpful in my subsequent work as a freelance writer.

The writing I was doing was not the kind of writing that was required in a business letter. It was a narrative, it had to engage the reader, and it meant analyzing political and economic forces outside the company. It also lead to the analysis of personalities inside the process. The thrill of victory the agony of defeat. As a bonus, at the heart of much of the action were changes in agreement language and disputes about language.

I worked on it on and off for a few years and while I wrote a couple chapters I never finished it before I left the company. As a result of the experience, however, I learned something about writing corporate history. I have since been hired to write pamphlets studying particular examples of labor-management cooperation for the state of Pennsylvania.

The second project was actually a cluster of activities. Throughout my time in labor relations I became increasingly interested in the negotiation process and the way conflict is resolved. I read Fisher and Ury's *Getting to Yes* and found out about the Harvard Negotiating Project. I joined the Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution (or SPIDR) and met Joseph Folger of Temple University's Communication and Theater Department who specializes in the communications aspect of the mediation process. I began to read and study in the field of dispute resolution. My company paid for my membership in SPIDR and for me to attend conferences and workshops involving conflict resolution issues. I became more aware of how

literature and the media shape our attitudes toward how we resolve the conflicts in our lives and I began to write about that, not just in memos but in articles for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

The final project I want to talk about may seem the most farfetched. While I was working as a manager of labor relations, I decided that I wanted to get back to doing some scholarly work in English. I did an assessment of my interests and decided I wanted to study linguistics. Even those interested in the field admit it is often obscure and misunderstood. After I had been studying independently for a couple years, I approached my boss with a recommendation that we look into developing a proto-type labor agreement expert system that could answer queries in natural language. He was interested.

The company paid for me to join the Linguistic Society of America and the Association for Computational Linguistics and bought artificial intelligence software for me. This project meant that I spent time on the railroad translating labor agreements into logical propositions and learning about how "natural language interfaces" worked. Out of my combined work in linguistics and labor relations came an article -- "Using Basic Linguistic Analysis to Control Ambiguity in Labor Agreements"-- published in the Bulletin of the Association for Business Communications.

These examples illustrate not that my background and interests in English advanced me, but that once advanced I could do some of the things that interested me. You should be aware

that I spent much time doing boring things, but that happens to all of us. I was, however, consistently able to shape my job, at least in part, to fit my interests.

The critical step was to see the potential. I took that step when I realized that I was not just summarizing events in the department of a company, but that I was writing history complete with the potential to reveal how human nature works in important collective undertakings. I took that step when I realized I was dealing not simply with labor disputes, but with problems of communication and understanding with wide reaching implications. I took that step when I realized I was not simply considering the language of labor agreements, but that I was studying linguistics and how language works.

We must help students see this potential. In the effective classroom, they see how the interaction of experience and literature allows them to grow in their understanding of both literature and experience. They should learn to expect similar opportunities on the job.

The first step for those of us who teach English is to drop what is frequently a defensive posture. We must also be clear about what we have to offer. I used to teach my courses as exercises in literary criticism. Literature in that context was a fascinating anthropological artifact and the course gave students the opportunity to understand this human enterprise. Perhaps I was an extreme case, but I wanted to expose the students to an intellectual activity that I enjoyed. It was as if I were teaching people who had never driven how to rebuild a

carburetor. It was hard for them to see the value of what they were doing. I had to switch from automobile mechanics to driver's ed. Now I am trying to show them that literature can get them to where they want to go.

But I do not formulate the destination as a job. I have them keep journals and do other writing assignments that encourage them to relate what they are reading to their lives. They make some wonderful connections. There is a danger, however, that they will do a straight identification, assume that Elizabeth Bennet is like them in all respects and that early 19th century English country families are the same as 20th century suburban American families. In class discussion and in response to their work I emphasize that it is important to look at the world in the literary work as the work defines it. For example, particularly when I teach the old stuff--classical and medieval-- I often begin discussion with the question "In the world of this work, what is a hero?" Before we can answer the question, "Who is the hero?" we need to establish the context. Once they understand "hero" in relation to the literary work, then they relate that hero-in-context to their own lives. The experience of context and the awareness of the impact of a shift in context seem to me to be the major contribution that my literary studies made to my life.

The study of literature has always helped people understand the larger context, the symbolic implications of a missing key or a ruined abbey. An experience with literature supplies students with experience in and models for understanding their

actions in a context larger than themselves. A religious sensibility supplies many people with a moral context for their actions. The values people confront in literature can supply a great range of contexts in which people can see themselves as acting heroically in taking risks or nobly in making sacrifices. The people who can think this way have a tremendous advantage over those who cannot reframe their environment and can only understand it in the way it is given to them. The study of literature allows people to add value to their other actions.

In our English classes we should be equipping students to make jobs fit what they see as valuable. The first step is to give them experience at seeing the power of context, seeing how a world different from the one they live in can be imagined, how that world can make the actions of forces and individuals within it meaningful. Envisioning a new world is the first step in changing the real world, whether that world is a business, a government agency, a school, a community, or a relationship. In the real world we live in, one desperately in need of change, the ability to initiate the process of change is becoming increasingly valuable. In these times perhaps we yield the highest return for our English majors on their tuition investment by equipping them to become visionaries. And incidentally, I can tell you from experience, that it pays well.

Works Cited:

Fisher, Roger and William Ury. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating*

Agreement Without Giving In. New York: Penguin, 1981.

Useem, Michael. *Liberal Education and the Corporation.* Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989.